

## Black General Officers: Why We Lack Them

by

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# USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The American Military is widely viewed as a pioneer in providing equal opportunity for its uniformed members. However, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission (MLDC), which was mandated by the 2009 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), calls for greater diversity in the military. The commission declared in March 2011, the United States military is too white and too male at the senior most ranks and needs to change recruiting and promotion policies. It is no secret that the Army is out of balance at the senior level and lacks Black general officers. In anticipation of an impending demographic shift, and based on the lack of Black general officers in the Army, our senior civilian and military leaders must overhaul current officer corps policies for accessions, branching, and assignments. This research effort is consistent with the spirit of organizational self-examination and provides recommendations to increase Black officer representation at the senior most levels. In pursuit of this end state, this strategy research project (SRP) addresses three primary areas of emphasis; accessions, branching, and assignments, which have the most impact on promotion to general officer.





## BLACK GENERAL OFFICERS: WHY WE LACK THEM

The Military Leadership Diversity Commission (MLDC), which was mandated by the 2009 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), calls for greater diversity in the military's leadership so it will better reflect the racial, ethnic and gender mix in the armed forces and in American society. The commission, which was comprised of a committee of two dozen people consisting of current and former military personnel, businessmen and other civilians, presented a report in March 2011 which determined the United States military is too white and too male at the senior most ranks and needs to change recruiting and promotion policies. In accordance with a September 2008 report by an independent panel, 77% of senior officers in the active-duty military are White, while only 8% are Black, 5% are Hispanic and 16% are women.<sup>1</sup> On March 1, 2012, the General Officer Management Office (GOMO) published a General Officer Minority Report – Total Force, which in addition to active duty general officers included United States Army Reserves (USAR) and United States Army National Guard (USARNG) mobilized general officers. Based on the report, the total number of general officers ranging from colonels promotable to four star generals was 423. Of the 423, 38 were Black (8.98%), 9 of the 38 were West Point graduates, and 3 of the 38 were female. Of the 35 Black male general officers, 13 were combat arms officers (37%), and 6 of the 13 combat arms officers were West Point graduates. While statistics should never be the primary motivating source for promotion to the rank of general officer, our Nation's civilian and military leaders cannot dismiss or totally ignore these statistics. Taking into consideration the manner in which media reports influence public opinion across the globe, reports and findings of this nature are cause for alarm and require senior leaders

to determine underlying factors that influence these types of problems and subsequently develop solutions to fix and mitigate them. The MLDC went on to note, “efforts over the years to develop a more equal opportunity military have increased the number of women and racial and ethnic minorities in the ranks of leadership” but, the report asserts, “despite undeniable successes ... the armed forces has not yet succeeded in developing a continuing stream of leaders who are as diverse as the nation they serve.”<sup>2</sup> Given these circumstances, Army senior leaders must once again become pioneers and set the example for the rest of the Nation to follow. In doing so, these senior leaders can use their own career experiences as an example because they are products of a military that instituted robust equal opportunity programs over 25 years ago which are in part responsible for the advancement made to date with respect to racial, ethnic and gender inclusion. Not only did the military’s current cohort of senior level leaders develop under these circumstances, they also developed their subordinates under these same conditions.

Historically, when the Army has faced a problem of this nature it has always managed to resolve the problem in a manner that establishes an example for other national institutions and organizations to emulate. The military became a deliberately inclusive organization in 1948, when President Harry S. Truman issued his historic Executive Order 9981 that called for the “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed forces.”<sup>3</sup> President Truman and his administration understood that an integrated force could more effectively defend a culturally, socially, and racially segregated democratic Nation. Since then, the Army has endeavored to become an inclusive organization dedicated to ensuring equality for all Soldiers, regardless of their

background. This degree of dedication to equal opportunity has resulted in increased representation of racial and ethnic minorities and women among top military leaders in recent decades. While Executive Order 9981 was genuinely a “game changing” occurrence in American Armed Service history, it also laid the foundation for the advancement and expansion of the Civil Rights struggle in America. In the final analysis, Executive Order 9981, paved the way for more equitable treatment for all minorities. It should be clarified that this strategy research project (SRP) intentionally focuses on Black male officers rather than other minority groups. “If the Army develops solutions to improve the circumstances for the largest minority group within the Army (Blacks), those solutions will also benefit and assist other minorities in the future.”<sup>4</sup>

#### Framing the Current Problem

Despite these accomplishments, six decades after President Truman’s executive order, there are very few African American officers among the most senior grades in the Army. African Americans along with other racial and ethnic minorities and women still lag behind non-Hispanic white men in terms of representative percentages of military leadership positions held.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting, however, that President Truman’s actions in 1948 to provide equality opportunity in the armed forces took several decades to bear fruit, as measured by the current slowly increasing representation of minorities in the flag and general officer ranks.<sup>6</sup> The MLDC identified three factors that combine to explain racial, ethnic and minority (gender) discrepancies in representation among senior military leaders: low racial presence among initial officer accessions, lower representation of racial/ethnic minority officers in career fields associated with advancement to general officer rank, and lower rates of advancement among racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of Black general officers in the Army is relevant and requires the full attention of the Nation's civilian and Army leaders. The Army views itself as a national trailblazer in embracing the strengths of diverse people in an inclusive environment. This assessment is appropriate and true for the Army's enlisted diversity landscape; however it does not apply to the officer corps, particularly at the most senior ranks. In addressing this situation, senior civilian and military leaders must employ a holistic approach to address three primary areas of emphasis; accessions; branching; and assignments; which directly impact general officer promotion. This research effort is focused on the Army's "line" or basic branch officers, and does not address the Army Medical Department, Judge Advocate General Corps or Chaplain Corps. Additionally, the report is concentrated on the Active Component and does not address general officer strength in the Army National Guard or Army Reserve.

United States Representative Elijah Cummings from Maryland wrote a letter dated June 24, 2009, to then Secretary of the Army the Honorable Pete Geren, which included:

"I understand that the Army is in the process of developing a strategic plan to correct this imbalance in efforts to resolve congressional concerns regarding the lack of qualified African-Americans who obtain the rank of General Officer in the Army. While the Army has made a good faith effort to address areas of minority underrepresentation, more aggressive steps are needed in order to achieve a fully diverse force and capitalize on the strength of this diversity. timeframe (sic) the Army has yet to identify concrete metrics to capture performance progress. Having addressed this issue for the past three years, the Army should be able to provide tangible results as a true measure of the leadership's commitment to institutionalizing diversity into the culture through their effective and efficient practices."<sup>8</sup>

### Number of Army General Officers Authorized by Law

In addressing this concern, the Army cannot simply increase the number of generals and promote more Black officers to the rank of general because general officer authorizations are regulated by law. The legal foundation for the number of general officers in the Army is contained in Title 10, United States Code (USC). This law also prescribes the officer corps' strength and grade authorizations. The statutory requirements of Title 10 USC have been disseminated through regulatory directives and policies with regard to the establishment and management of the general officer promotion system. "Under regulations prescribed by the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of each military department may, for an armed force under his jurisdiction, prescribe the strength of any category of officers that may serve on active duty."<sup>9</sup> While law defines the number of general officers in the Army, the United States Code of law limits the total number of active duty general officers at 302 for the Army. This includes all general ranks, from brigadier general to general, for active Army only. "No appointment may be made in a grade above brigadier general in the Army if that appointment would result in more than 50% of general officers being on active duty in grades above brigadier general."<sup>10</sup> No appointment may be made in a grade above major general (two stars) in the Army if that appointment would result in more than 15.7% of the general officers of that armed force on active duty being in grades above major general.<sup>11</sup> "This calculates to  $302 \times .157 = 47.4$ . Legally the Army cannot have more than 47 generals above the rank of major general. Of that 15.7%, not more than 25% may serve in the rank of general. This calculates to  $47.4 \times .25 = 11.85$ . Therefore, 11 is the legal maximum of generals that the Army can have on active duty at this time."<sup>12</sup> The law has a built in procedure that imposes a ceiling on the number of general

officers the Army can have on active duty. In addition to these regulations, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff may designate up to 12 general officer and flag officer positions that are joint duty assignments in accordance with Title 10, United States Code (USC). Officers in positions so designated shall not be counted for the purposes of the limitations.<sup>13</sup>

As indicated in this summary, general officer management in the Army is a dynamic, highly visible, and complex system that is significantly influenced by law and policy. Historically, Congress has been very involved in all aspects of officer management and supportive of enhancing the effectiveness and professionalism of the officer corps.<sup>14</sup> One could ask what the system is and who manages the pipeline for general officers, and how does the Army ensure the right and best are selected for senior leadership positions? It starts with our officer accessions process. “The number of officers, by grade and specialty, are defined by Army requirements, law, budget and policy. The combination of these factors determines the number of officers to access, promote, develop, assign and separate.”<sup>15</sup>

### Officer Accessions

According to the Army’s Officer Personnel Management Division, the accessions process is designed to access and integrate the right number of officers into the right branches or military occupational specialties, in order to meet the needs of the Army within current authorized manpower and budgetary constraints.<sup>16</sup> The officer accessions process provides the means to support the Army officer corps and by default has the most impact with regards to influencing the representation of minorities at senior levels in the future force.<sup>17</sup> The Army’s three primary commissioning sources include the United States Military Academy (USMA), the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC),

and Officer Candidate School (OCS). Currently, the Reserve officers Training Corps and Officer Candidate School produce the vast majority of African American commissioned officers.

Representative Elijah Cummings, in his letter to Army Secretary Pete Geren, dated June 24, 2009 stated “in order to effectively grow senior leaders, the Army must first increase the pool of minority officers seeking commissions through West Point, and the Reserve Officers Training Corps.”<sup>18</sup> Representative Cummings moreover cited a June 17, 2009 report published by the Boston Globe, in which, USMA had a 9% increase in applications submitted for the class of 2013. In comparison, the same report indicated that the Naval Academy had a 41% increase in overall applications and 57% of this increase constituted minority applicants.<sup>19</sup> This comparison doesn’t bode well for the Army, and in order to ensure the Army emerges as a diverse and strategically aligned organization, “Top-Down Leadership” is required to transform the way the Army thinks and acts culturally.

The birth of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program is unique, as demonstrated in the following abstract found in Gary Schmidt’s and Cheryl Miller’s report titled, *The Military Should Mirror the Nation*. “The American political system strives for national majorities over simple majorities, and that objective should be reflected in our Army as well. Since its formal adoption in 1916, the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) was intended as such a national program. Uncomfortable with the prospect of all the professional military elite trained at service academies, political leaders sought to diversify the officer corps through ROTC at colleges and universities. By virtue of their different educational experiences, these officers would infuse the

military with a broader set of civilian values and help ensure that the military's leadership is more reflective of the entire country.”<sup>20</sup> Essentially, the purpose of the ROTC program was to provide diversity in the Army officer corps, and the fact that it continues to lead the Army's effort in producing diverse commissioned officers is important. Through specific and deliberate engagement with political leaders of the day, the Army was able to implement a crucial change to the Army's officer producing programs. This change was designed to alleviate what Congress foresaw as a potential future problem in the Army officer corps, that if not fixed, with a sense of purpose and urgency, could have a devastating negative impact on the Nation and the Army.

In 1916, political leaders persuasively argued for diversity within the officer corps and pushed for improvements that undeniably laid the foundation for what would become the greatest Army the world has ever seen. In advancing their cause, Congress influenced an Army officer corps culture that now comprised norms, values, beliefs and assumptions more reflective of the nation's demographics, and that best represented our society. In order to once more meet the needs of an ever increasing diverse society, now is the right time for another bold and corrective action by the Nation's political and military leaders in reference to the Army's officer producing programs.

While all three of the above-mentioned commissioning sources produce officers, their accessions strategies are not synchronized, and all three are managed differently. A United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) report to Congress, dated January 2007, titled Strategic Plan Needed to Address Army's Emerging Officer Accession and Retention Challenges, asserts “the Army currently does not have an accession strategy.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, the Army's three accession programs are



decentralized and do not formally coordinate with one another, making it difficult for the Army, using a traditional approach, to effectively manage risks and allocate resources across programs in an integrated, strategic fashion. Without a strategic, integrated plan, the Army's ability to meet its future mission requirements and to transform is uncertain. Furthermore, having a centralized strategy would enable the Army to more effectively recruit, access and commission a greater number of African Americans, which is an important first step in reversing current trends with respect to African American general officers. The percentage of Black officers (Commissioned and Warrants) in the active-duty Army over the past 20 plus years significantly exceeds that of the other active-duty sister services as indicated in the below figure.

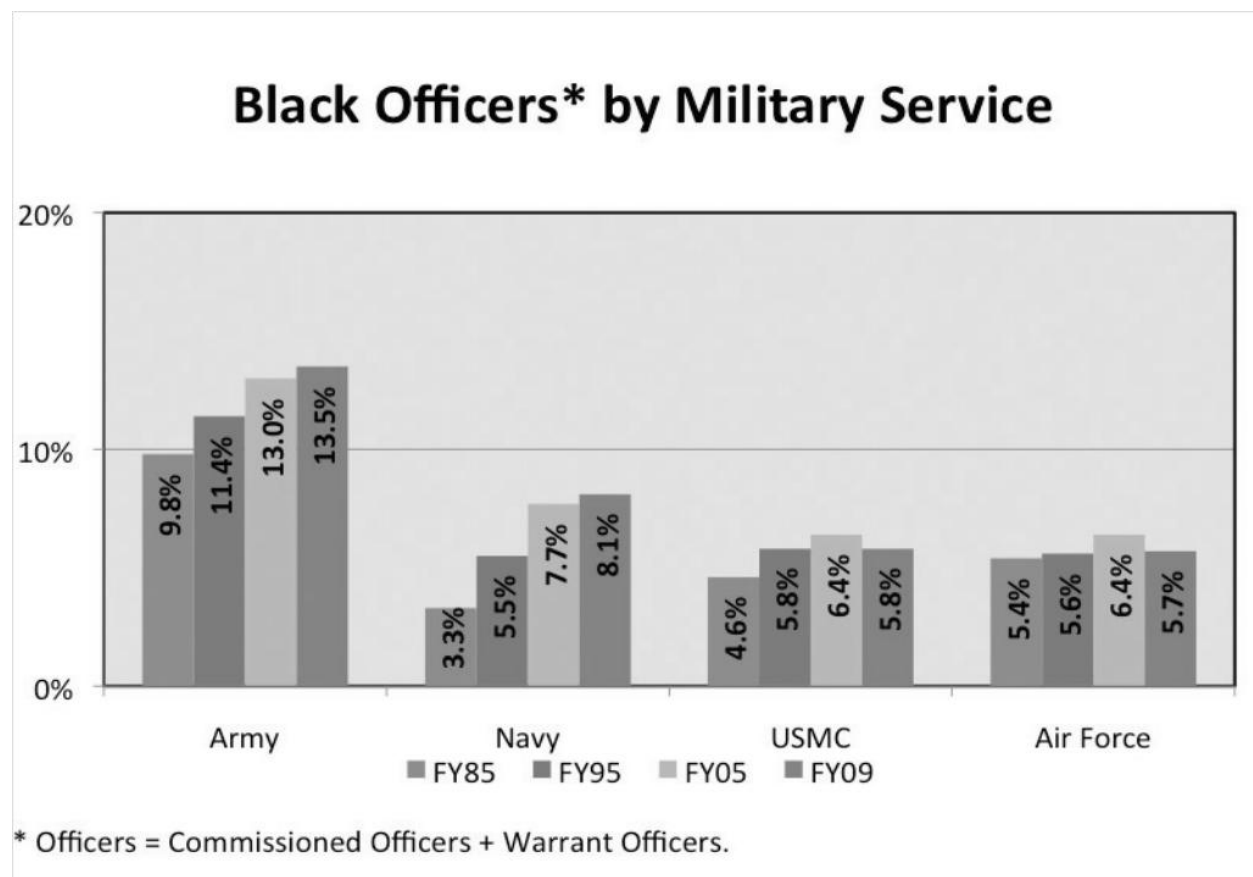


Figure 1: Black Officers by Military Service

“In FY85, nearly 10% of Army officers were black and this percentage increased to approximately 14% in FY09. Black officers representation in the Navy, although lower than the Army’s representation, has increased significantly since FY85, growing from 3% to 8% in FY09. Black officer representation in the Air Force and the Marine Corps, on the other hand, has remained relatively steady over time approximately 5% to 6%).”<sup>22</sup>

### Officer Branching

The specific type of career field an officer is assigned to is important as it pertains to promotion to general officer and is an essential part of the accessions process called branching. Every primary Army officer commissioning source has a different branching process which often times leads to confusion and dissatisfaction. By definition, a branch is a category of officers that comprises an arm or service of the Army in which, as a minimum, officers are commissioned, assigned, professionally developed and promoted through their company grade years.<sup>23</sup> Officers are accessed into a single basic branch and will hold that branch designation, which is later augmented between the 5th and 6th years of service with a functional area. The branch an officer receives upon commissioning is based on the needs of the Army.<sup>24</sup> The officer branching process is the first genuine discriminator the Black officer encounters in the Army officer corps and represents the first systemic flaw in the officer corps career progression system which impacts the general officer ranks.

Currently, the senior ranks of the officer corps are heavily populated with West Point graduates, who have a narrow demographic background. This is important because the source of pre-commissioning education affects the likelihood of promotion.<sup>25</sup> “Current Army policy requires 80% of males and 20% of females at West Point to be placed into the Combat Arms branches.”<sup>26</sup> “At least 80% of USMA graduates

each year will be assigned into combat arms branches; specifically, Armor, Air Defense Artillery, Aviation, Field Artillery, Infantry, or Engineer. The remaining 20% may compete for branches in combat service support (CSS) and combat support (CS). Male graduates selecting CS or CSS branch must serve in a branch detail status (actually assigned to a combat arms position) during their first assignment. Additionally, 2% of each USMA class may be accepted for medical school.”<sup>27</sup> There is no similar type of guidance or policy with regard to branching for OCS or ROTC. As part of a synchronized accessions and promotion strategy, the Army should deliberately implement a branching process that is understood and coordinated among the three commissioning sources.<sup>28</sup>

Currently, the Army’s branching process has what I will refer to as a “privileged branch,” that branch is the combat arms branch. Army officers achieving the highest ranks have a tendency to originate from combat arms branches, and the composition of these branches are disproportionately non-minority. In May 2007, 2.5% of the 302 general officers were Black.<sup>29</sup> The fundamental absence of minorities in these branches has a considerable influence on the diversity of the senior leadership. For the three major branches of the Army, Black officers were less likely to serve in Combat Arms (22%) jobs and more likely to be in Combat Service Support (27%) jobs. White, Hispanic, and Asian officers were more likely to serve in Combat Arms jobs. Similar to the enlisted ranks, there was little difference by race/ethnicity of officers serving in

Combat Support jobs (Figure 2).<sup>30</sup>

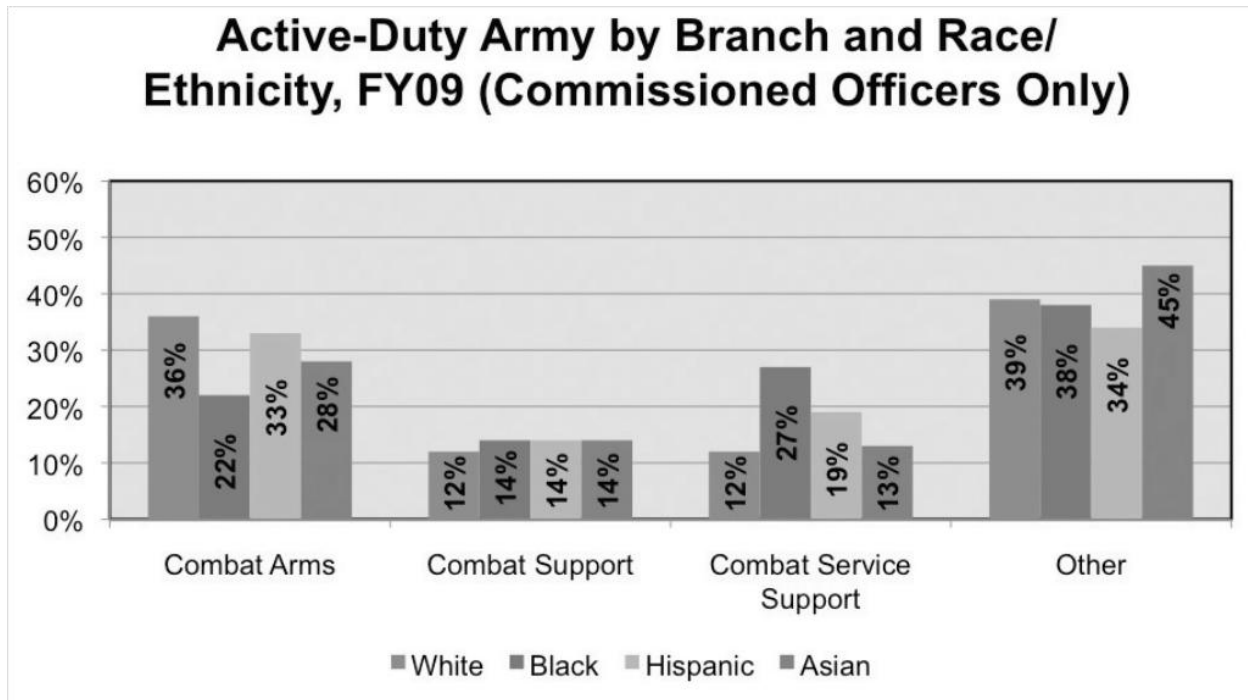


Figure 2: Note: The Branches of the Army have been changed such that Combat Arms (CA) is currently Maneuver Fires & Effects (MFE); Combat Support (CS) is now Operations Support (OS); and Combat Service Support (CSS) is Force Sustainment (FS).

Correspondingly, promotion and key assignment opportunities have favored those in combat arms branches and with combat leadership qualifications; the big question is should this be the case? “Achieving increased representation of minorities and women among general and flag officers will largely depend on increasing their numbers in career-enhancing occupations in lower ranks. Such assignments have been taking place with increasing frequency.”<sup>31</sup>

#### The Officer Assignment Process

The officer personnel assignment system is a functional subsystem of the Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS). “The goal of this subsystem is to place the right officer in the right job at the right time.”<sup>32</sup> Assignments have a significant impact on

an officer's career progression and are the second most discriminating area that may contribute to the lack of Black officers at the general officer rank. "Assignments have a clear bearing on an officer's progression through the ranks and ultimately may contribute to Black underrepresentation at the field grade and senior ranks."<sup>33</sup> The Department of the Army Form 483 (Officer Assignment Preference Statement) allows officers to express their assignment and duty preferences. Assignment managers consider individual preferences each time an officer is reassigned by Headquarters Department of the Army (HQDA). Every effort is made to comply with the officer's preferences consistent with the needs of the Army. This process works up to a certain point. As officers reach the rank of lieutenant colonel and colonel, their future assignments are impacted and driven more by a centralized selection process, for instance, battalion and brigade command, attendance at senior service colleges, and key HQDA positions are all centrally selected by the Army.

### Recommendations

John Kotter, a highly regarded subject matter expert in the field of organizational change, stated in his book titled, "Leading Change", that successful transformation is 70 to 90% leadership and only 10 to 30% management."<sup>34</sup> Until Army leaders develop strategies and provide the necessary leadership required to achieve diversity among the most senior ranks and make changes to the current accession and branching systems, we will continue to lack Black general officers. Failing to achieve this significant imperative does not reinforce the narrative "diversity is critical to the Army's effectiveness". In seeking to achieve this desired effect, senior Army leaders should use the efforts of Former Secretary of the Army, Clifford A. Alexander as an example to emulate.

Former Secretary of the Army Clifford L. Alexander was instrumental in transforming the top ranks of the Army during his tenure as Secretary of the Army from 1977 through 1981. Secretary Alexander once rejected a list of officers submitted for promotion to general because it included no Black candidates, even though he believed many Black colonels "had served with distinction".<sup>35</sup> He instructed the board that oversaw promotions to look more closely at the records of eligible Black colonels-a process that resulted in strong Black candidates being added to the general officer promotion list. One of the generals Alexander chose from that revised list was General Colin Powell, who went on to become the nation's top military officer when President George H.W. Bush chose him to be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>36</sup> When President Jimmy Carter appointed Alexander as Secretary of the Army, the Army had no more than 8 Black generals. By the time he left his post in 1981, there were 30 Black generals in the Army, which is a testament to the power of strong leadership. This is the type of strong leadership required to make changes that will positively impact the Army's senior officer ranks today and in the future.

Another area, in which senior Army leaders can impact the composition of the General Officer ranks, is by examining and critiquing the promotion profile and history of the Army. This is important because the Army has considerable autonomy in developing personnel policies, processes, and systems necessary to resolve and alleviate perceived or real inequities. To date the Army has been relatively unaggressive in its endeavor to solve what civilian leaders interpret as a problem. The Army must closely manage the assessment of diverse officers and communicate a well-defined purpose and commitment to building and sustaining a diverse bench and pool of officers that will

become future senior Army leaders. Furthermore, the Army must recruit the right amount and mixture of diverse officers to guarantee it reflects the nation. Civilian and military senior leaders must become active participants and provide the necessary oversight to ensure success. Any perceived lack of urgency as it applies to reversing current trends could prove detrimental to Army readiness and influence the degree of trust and confidence the nation has in the Army at large.

Senior leaders need to recognize that the Army of the future will perhaps not tolerate perceived or real imbalances in the officer corps at any level. Critical to a successful Army officer corps is a transparent system that ensures reasonable representation by minorities at the general officer level. A detailed implementation plan must negate any suggestion or suspicion of individual subjective sentiments or perceptions that preclude value judgments based on performance and potential, or that don't hold up against external scrutiny. This doesn't suggest by any means that the Army should implement and or adopt an affirmative action quota. There is no more moral requirement to guarantee that 14% of general officers are Black than to "guarantee that 85% of the players in the National Basketball Association are white."<sup>37</sup> However, the Army as an institution with strong values has a moral obligation to guarantee systems are fair for all, and to the extent possible reflect the demographic composition of the nation it serves.

The Army's plan to produce more Black general officers should incorporate the following recommendations referenced by the MLDC. To begin with the Army must improve outreach and recruiting strategies to address the accessions process and assist in increasing the initial flow of Black officers in the Army. Secondly, the Army

must eliminate barriers to career advancement; this recommendation implies having a standard branching process across all three commissioning sources. Essentially, the Army must eliminate or enforce the same standards for initial career field designation (branching) and subsequent career assignments to key positions.<sup>38</sup> Finally, the Army must institute a system of accountability, which includes legislative oversight of promotion processes. This will ensure the consistent and sustained implementation of the plan and vision. Senior leaders should hold internal accountability reviews and make adjustments as required. To ensure the diversity effort gets on “track” and stays on track, a pre-requisite and basis of evaluation for nomination and confirmation to the 3- and 4-star ranks by the Department of Defense and the Senate should include a review of the candidates demonstrated track record of providing opportunities to diverse officers, and demonstrated understanding of the direct impact diversity has to readiness and mission accomplishment.<sup>39</sup> “While the Army’s intentions are commendable, they are insufficient for future challenges. We must manage diversity, and this requires more than simply supplementing an old system with new initiatives. It requires changing the system and modifying the core culture.”<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion

The Army does not have equitable representation of Black officers at the general officer rank. The number of Black general officers has fluctuated over the years, yet the total number of Black generals over the past 20 years varies from approximately 22 to 38 at any point in time. The Army should modify its officer corps’ accession, branching, and assignment processes which underpin officer corps management standards and practices. Despite the criticisms and comments put forth in this paper, the Army has the finest officer producing programs in the world. This does not imply, however, that we



cannot make improvements to the current system; we can take the best of the three officer producing systems and make one Army-wide standard for accessions, branching, and assignments. The Army can demonstrate an increased commitment to diversity in its general officer ranks by ultimately implementing a proactive strategic approach to officer accessions, branching and assignments, to increase Black officer integration at the general officer level.

If we are unable to recruit and maintain a diverse officer corps which mirrors the nation demographically, the Army assumes the risk of creating challenges which could produce personnel challenges, impact readiness and undermine our professional fighting force. By 2050, if the Army is not reflective of the nation's demographic composition at its senior ranks, a lack populace support, trust and/or belief in the Army could potentially create a strategic dilemma for senior leaders. Senior Army leaders must war game and visualize potential worse case scenarios associated with the projected racial demographic change. The Army urgently needs a change in its policies and guidance to ensure it properly integrates diversity leadership at all levels of the officer corps and to ensure officers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century United States Army are prepared to function properly and maintain legitimacy in an ever increasing diverse society. This effort would represent a giant leap forward in addressing the institutional barriers which contribute to the scarce numbers of Black general officers in the Army.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Pauline Jelinek, Associated Press, "Report: Military Leaders too White, Male," March 8, 2011, [http://www.krqe.com/dpps/military/Report-says-too-many-whites-men-leading-military\\_3739677](http://www.krqe.com/dpps/military/Report-says-too-many-whites-men-leading-military_3739677) (accessed November 19, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The White House, Executive Order Number 9981, Establishing the President's Committee of Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, July 26, 1948.

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<sup>7</sup> Pauline Jelinek, Associated Press, Report: Military Leaders too White, Male, March 8, 2011, [http://www.krqe.com/dpps/military/Report-says-too-many-whites-men-leading-military\\_3739677](http://www.krqe.com/dpps/military/Report-says-too-many-whites-men-leading-military_3739677) (accessed November 19, 2011).

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<sup>14</sup> Charles A. Henning, *Army Officer Shortages: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington DC: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, July 5, 2006), 22.

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